DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 098 104 SO 007 876

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TITLE A Parent's Guide to the Social Studies.
INSTITUTION National Council for the Social Studies, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 74
NOTE 15p.
AVAILABLE FROM National Council for the Social Studies, 1201 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 ($0.75 each, $0.50 for two to 24 copies, $0.35 for 25 to 99 copies, $0.25 for 100-299 copies, and $0.20 for 300 or more copies)
JOURNAL CIT Social Education; v38 n6 Oct 1974

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC Not Available from EDRS. PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Educational Change; Educational Trends; Elementary Education; *Guidelines; Inquiry Training; *Parent Education; Parent Influence; Parent School Relationship; *Parent Teacher Cooperation; *Process Education; Secondary Education; Social Sciences; *Social Studies

ABSTRACT

This guide gives parents answers to seven questions: (1) What are the social studies? (2) How are the social studies taught? (3) Why do social studies educators say that knowing information is not enough? (4) Why are there so many social studies courses? (5) What is happening to the language of the social studies? (6) What issues are discussed in social studies classes? (7) How can parents help their children in the social studies? The answers emphasize that social studies focus on people, the world, and the relationship between these two and that, in consequence of this broad scope, social studies have expanded outside of the traditional history courses to include all of the social science disciplines. Social studies also emphasize skill in the thinking processes, not just in the acquisition of facts, and in freedom to inquire openly. Examples of ways in which parents can help their children with social studies include encouraging their children to express their own ideas at home; subscribing to at least two periodicals with differing points of view; taking an active part in PTA; going with their children to political, economic, or social events; and maintaining their faith in the ability of human beings to solve their problems. (JH)

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A Parent's Guide to the Social Studies

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SP 007 876

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Acknowledgments

The author wishes to express his appreciation to Dr. Barry K. Beyer, Publications Board Coordinator for this project, and to the eighteen readers—teachers, parents, students, and administrators—who evaluated the original manuscript. Their suggestions were invaluable.

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A Parent's Guide to the Social Studies

1. What Are the Social Studies?

A professor of government once recalled the story of a boy who was playing noisily while his father tried to read a magazine. The father in a final attempt to quiet his son tore out a page of the magazine on which there was a map of the world and cut it into bits. "Here is a puzzle for you," he said to his son, "try to put this map together." In a few moments the father was surprised to see the map perfectly arranged. "How did you do it so soon?" he asked his son. "Oh, that was simple," the boy replied. "You see, on the other side was a picture of a *man*. I put the man together and the *world* was all right."

In a sense, this story illustrates the nature of the *social studies* in American schools today, for the social studies focus on *people*, on the *world*, and on the *relationships* between the two. In brief, the social studies are those instructional courses, programs, and projects that are designed to assist your child to understand, analyze, react to, and act upon

1. The relationships of human beings to the world in which they live
2. The relationships of human beings to other human beings
3. The relationships of human beings to themselves

In some parts of the country, school systems use the plural when speaking of the "social sciences" but use the singular when referring to "social studies"—that is, "social studies is" instead of "social studies are." This is especially true in grades 6–8 when the courses are called Social Studies 6 or 7 or 8.

Over half a century ago—when the "big" motion pictures were Ben Hur (1907), Quo Vadis? (1913), and Don Juan (1926)—*history* was the key subject. Few people spoke of "social studies." And not surprisingly so, for the American people have always been concerned with the preservation of their history. Consider, for example,

these words written on a vial of tea leaves now on display at the Old South Meeting House in Boston

> Tea leaves picked up on the shore of Boston Harbor the morning after the tea was dumped overboard, December 16, 1773
>
> The gift of Rev. Edward Griffin Foster, 1893
>
> The vial and tea leaves were given Mr. Foster by Mrs. Martha Weld of Dedham, Massachusetts
>
> Mrs. Weld received them from Mrs. James Shute of Jamaica Plain
>
> Mrs. Shute acquired them from Mrs. Jabez Dow of Dover, New Hampshire
>
> Mrs. Dow was Hannah Waite of Malden, Massachusetts, and she inherited them from her mother, Rebecca, daughter of Thaddeus Mason of Charleston, Massachusetts

Thus, carefully handed down from person to person, the tea leaves were preserved and, with them, memories of a stirring event in America's past.

Other examples of America's devotion to history abound, and it is not surprising to find historical references on the moon itself! One crater has been named Camelot in honor of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, another is called Henry after Prince Henry the Navigator, and a third is named after the Druid priests of ancient Gaul and Ireland.

Today, history is still one of the social studies of great importance in the schools, but it is recognized that your child must also have an opportunity to explore *other* social studies courses such as Geography, Problems of Democracy, Political Science, Economics, Anthropology, Sociology, Contemporary Far East, Minorities in America, and a variety of others. Interdisciplinary courses in which music, art, and literature are drawn upon are also becoming increasingly popular. They help students understand *concepts*, mental images by which people can classify their experiences.

In brief, social studies are much more than history alone. History is not being neglected. Rather, the study of human beings is being expanded. Indeed, where necessary to understand people and their relationships in the world in which they live, social studies teachers may explore the entire spectrum of human knowledge, attitudes, values, and actions.

2. How Are the Social Studies Taught?

Do you remember how it was when you were at school? Did you have a dog-eared textbook known as "the green book" or "the brown book" (written ten years before you even touched it), a dominating teacher (who lectured constantly and set down dates and times on the blackboard as if he or she were the head of a railroad information booth), tiresome nightly homework (that consisted of fifteen pages of minute facts about wars, boundary lines, and alliances, all of which were to be memorized), and frightening true-false tests (in which all answers were either right or wrong—with a double penalty if you dared to guess)?

A knowledge of facts is still important in today's social studies. However, it is recognized that mere memorization of facts may be futile for these reasons.

Facts change. Remember how you memorized that President Abraham Lincoln wrote every word of the Gettysburg Address on the back of an old envelope while he was riding on a train to Gettysburg? Scholars now tell us that this "fact" is inaccurate. Lincoln spent far more time than this preparing his memorable address. Remember how you learned in geography that Columbus was the first person in the fifteenth century to reach the "New World"? Geographers now tell us that a sea chart dated 1424 suggests that some Portuguese navigators may have preceded Columbus to that land.

People often contradict themselves. The Frenchman Rousseau once said in one of his books "... you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody." But just as you set down as a "fact" that Rousseau was against private property, you read his comment in another of his writings: "It is certain that the right of property is the most sacred of all the rights of citizens and more important in some respects than liberty itself." Which "fact" shall a teacher tell your child?

People differ in their points of view. Two individuals can look at the same event and describe the "facts" of what happened differently. That is one reason why one book may be entitled *The Civil War* and another on the same topic *The War Between the States*.

Thus, faced with the changing nature of "facts," an increasing number of social studies teachers are focusing on the tasks of *inquiry*—that is, they are trying to help your child to ask productive

questions, to set up hypotheses, to search for evidence, to analyze findings, to draw tentative conclusions about the questions raised. In brief, these teachers and students are more concerned with developing *skills in the processes of thinking* than in the memorization of facts.

Your children *do* learn as many facts as earlier generations did—probably more. But these facts are used not for the purpose of memorization but to assist the students to develop the ability to think clearly, to feel with compassion, and to make intelligent decisions and choices.

Thus, while some social studies teachers continue to use only traditional methods, many others no longer rely exclusively on the lecture or on a single textbook. These inquiry-minded teachers, who wish to think *with* rather than *for* students, provide their students with opportunities to see films and filmstrips, to listen to tapes and records, to participate in role-playing and simulations, to survey the community on key problems, to undertake independent research projects, to handle artifacts, to analyze source materials, to work directly with organizations, to photograph scenes of social significance, to travel outside the school environment, and to experiment with a variety of learning experiences—all of which can help students learn how to learn on their own.

Even the traditional length of time for social studies courses is changing. Now there are short courses, summer seminars, extended field trips, and independent study programs. Also there have been significant changes in sizes of groups (both larger and smaller) and in room sizes and shapes. In addition, more effort is being made to assist children who learn in different ways and at different paces.

All of this—and more—is being done to help children to develop their abilities to think effectively and to learn ways of making sound judgments and decisions about the world, about people, and about themselves.

3. Why Do Social Studies Educators Say That Knowing Information Is Not Enough?

"The difference between knowing and feeling," wrote poet John Ciardi, "is the same as the difference between sound waves and music, or between a glass of water and an ocean. nothing really happens to the data of things until they have been taken into the emo-

tion of perception." An increasing number of social studies teachers agree: however useful knowledge is, feelings are equally important. For it is the way people *feel* about *knowledge* that usually determines the *action* they take. All three elements—knowledge, feelings, and action—are essential for the development of society.

Do not be surprised then, if, after obtaining the *knowledge* that there were forty wars in the world between 1945 and 1965, children in a social studies class discuss how they *feel* about this fact and what they might *do* about the situation. Or, instead of memorizing (and probably soon forgetting) that "three out of four children live in underdeveloped countries, where mortality rates among one-year-olds to four-year-olds are about 40 times higher than in the developed countries," children in social studies classes also may be examining the significance of this fact, exploring their emotional reactions, and, perhaps, deciding to take some individual or group action to improve the situation.

Equally important is your child's development of *values*. Values can be defined as the criteria or standards by which a person chooses goals. A major problem is how to construct values in an age when new explosions of knowledge and rapidly changing events are disrupting the foundations of society. At a time when astronaut John Glenn's space capsule is already considered dated enough to be placed in a museum of the Smithsonian Institution, the mere memorization of a body of facts cannot guarantee that children will have sound values.

Here again, in values education, a competent social studies teacher does not indoctrinate students with his or her own values, or tell children *what* to believe, or try to change their convictions. Rather, your children are provided with opportunities to analyze, clarify, and work out their own set of values. For example, social studies students might discuss such problems as these:

- In a class in geography or economics—A city finishes its budgetary year with a surplus of several million dollars. It can use the money to do one of the following: (1) build additional seats in the football stadium, (2) develop green areas for parks, (3) construct public housing, (4) establish a research center to study the effects of pollution, or (5) attract new industries. "What values are involved in reaching a decision, and what would you (the student) do? Why?"

- In a class in sociology --A statistical study shows that in a small midwest town the living is pleasant for young people, family life is strong, and there are enjoyable relations between parents and children. Statistics also show, however, that, when they become adults, many children leave this town for a nearby city that is filled with conflict and problems. "What values are involved in reaching a decision to remain or to leave the town, and what would you (the student) do? Why?"

Classes in Political Science, Anthropology, American History, and other courses provide other opportunities for your children to analyze and clarify their values. By doing so, students may be able to develop standards by which they can live productive and satisfying lives.

How different such social studies classes are from the way they used to be!

4. Why Are There So Many Social Studies Courses?

There was a time—not so long ago—when every child was required to "take" the same social studies courses. These included two years of American History, one year of World History (really European History), and one year of Civics. Today, while continuing to recognize the importance of these subjects, curriculum-makers point out that if our children are to understand the relationships among people, social studies must be greatly expanded from kindergarten through the twelfth grade and beyond.

Thus, to assist children to understand the international aspects of our world, there is an increasing number of courses about other countries, including non-western lands: Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

To deepen children's understanding of the contributions of all people to civilization, there is an increasing number of courses about minorities: Blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and others.

To develop children's sensitivity to people, there is an increasing number of courses about human relations. For example, the National Center for Educational Statistics estimates that in 1970-71 there were as many as 5,779 secondary schools teaching psychology (a course taught in either the social studies or the science department).

to 508,792 students, and that the percentage of total enrollment nearly doubled between 1960–61 and 1970–71.

As a result, one representative high school in Maryland with a large faculty and an enrollment of 2,000 students today offers all of the following courses:

U. S. History and Government
Modern World History
Economics
Sociology
Cultural Anthropology
Physical Anthropology
Far Eastern History
Russian History
Western Civilization
European History
Black Studies
Human Geography
Urban Geography
Problems of the Twentieth Century
(Six courses with units on such areas as Crime and Punishment, Women's Liberation, Environment and Pollution, Civil Protest, Race Relations, Implications of Technology on Society, Poverty, and Population.)

In many schools, after students have satisfied their basic requirements, such as in American History, they would be able to choose their own social studies courses.

5. What Is Happening to the Language of the Social Studies?

Language never remains static. It is always in a process of change, and the language of social studies is continually changing today. Indeed, *The Barnhart Dictionary of New English Since 1963* lists over 5,000 new terms, and a number of them are in the area of the social studies. Thus, one of the difficult tasks of the social studies teacher, who must read constantly to keep abreast with new ideas, is to help your child understand words and terms that were *nonexistent* a decade ago.

With the coming of new words has also come a new realization of how complicated human relationships can be. An increasing number of social studies teachers are recognizing that, while it may have been fashionable to paste simple labels on people in the 1950's and 1960's, it is no longer accurate or just to do so today. Instead of labelling groups "hawks," "doves," "disadvantaged," "reactionary bourgeoisie," "left wingers," "right wingers," "backward peoples,"

swingers," and other overgeneralized terms, many social studies teachers and students are making conscientious efforts to clarify the meaning of words and to avoid stereotyping individuals in a group. As one high school student wrote, "It's about time we got rid of that stereotype about 'the broken Black family.' My family is as strong and united as any white family I know." Another student declared, "A newspaper reporter recently described the life of 'immoral suburbanite fathers.' Well, my father doesn't fit the picture at all. He doesn't drink three martinis at five o'clock, he doesn't play golf, and he doesn't swap wives. That reporter should have taken my social studies course in propaganda analysis."

In addition, serious attempts are being made to eliminate discriminatory terms and expressions in the language of social studies. Blacks and other minority groups have been misrepresented or nonrepresented in textbooks for years. Fortunately, gains are being made against the language of discrimination.

The treatment of women in books is a case in point. For years social studies texts have been male-oriented. Today, however, a number of social studies courses are trying to change the situation. For example, in one class students might be made conscious of discrimination against women by being asked the following:

WHICH SENTENCE DO YOU PREFER?

1. George Ferris married the daughter of the wealthy Boston banker, Edward Howell.

   OR

   Alice Howell of Boston, heir to a banking fortune, married George Ferris.

2. Abraham Lincoln and his wife and his son left for Illinois.

   OR

   Abraham and Mary Lincoln and their son left for Illinois.

Exercises such as this help to clarify how the placement of words can set the tone of a book and affect the attitude of the reader toward women.

Educators also know now that scores received in tests (social studies tests as well as others) often are determined by (a) the information a person possesses and (b) the *language* used. Such scores

should not be interpreted as reliable indications of intelligence. As Professor Jerome Kagan points out (*Inequality in Education* (No. 14, July, 1973, Harvard Center for Law and Education)

HOW DO YOU TALK?

Table 1 lists five questions taken from the vocabulary or information tests of the Wechsler Scale and five questions taken from a test devised by Adrian Dove. Dove's questions were selected to be familiar to urban poor blacks and the Wechsler questions to be familiar to middle-class white Americans.

Table 1

Wechsler Test

1. Who wrote Hamlet?
2. Who wrote the Iliad?
3. What is the Koran?
4. What does *audacious* mean?
5. What does *plagiarize* mean?

Dove's Test

1. In C. C. Ryder, what does C. C. stand for?
2. What is a gashead?
3. What is Willy Mays' last name?
4. What does "handkerchief head" mean?
5. Whom did "Stagger Lee" kill in the famous blues legend?

It is unreasonable to ask whether high scores on either test measure anything to do with basic mental capacity. A person's score reflects the probability that he has been exposed to the information requested.

Today, increasing attention is being given to students' varying backgrounds in information and language. This is particularly true in the social studies.

6. What Issues Are Discussed in Social Studies Classes?

The effectiveness of a social studies class often depends on the freedom of the teacher and the student to inquire openly, to read from a wide spectrum of books, to discuss issues honestly, and to

express views without fear of being penalized for holding unpopular opinions. This freedom can be a major factor in achieving one of the objectives of social studies: the development of effective citizenship in a democratic society.

However today, as in the past, there is no agreement among parents, school administrators, teachers, or students on how far such freedom should go. For example, members of some communities have felt that students should not read John Steinbeck's book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, or George Orwell's *1984*. Others have been opposed to John Hersey's *Hiroshima* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. Still others have attacked the *National Geographic* magazine on the grounds that it was pornographic. In addition, individual teachers have been sharply criticized and sometimes fired for refusing to accept orders not to discuss with their students certain controversial issues.

On the other hand, other parents, school administrators, teachers, and students feel strongly that few, if any, limitations should be placed on teachers' and students' rights to read about and discuss any issue, however controversial it may be. They are convinced that an unrestricted and open analysis of problems will result in the development of students with sound values and in a better society.

The question is not "Which parents care the most about their children's development?" On the contrary, it is recognized that most parents, regardless of their position on this matter, are deeply concerned about their children's education. All parents therefore have a dual right: (1) a right to be assured that their children are not being indoctrinated or forced to accept the opinions of their teachers on political, economic, and social issues; and, at the same time, (2) a right to be assured that the freedom of their children and their children's teachers to inquire, to read, and to think for themselves is not being unfairly interfered with.

The role of social studies teachers is crucial here, and it is essential that parents support their teaching efforts, provided that the teachers accept both their rights and their responsibilities. (The National Council for the Social Studies, the national professional association of teachers of social studies, set down its position concerning these teacher rights and responsibilities in a Policy Statement. You can obtain a copy of it by writing to NCSS, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.)

7. How Can Parents Help Their Children in the Social Studies?

The ultimate responsibility for learning about the social studies rests with your child. However, there are at least eleven things that you as a parent may want to do to assist your child in this task.

1. Encourage your child to express his or her ideas on political, economic, and social matters freely at home—even if they differ from your own—and discuss these ideas with him or her on a basis of mutual respect for each other as individuals.

2. Subscribe to at least two magazines or newspapers that take widely different positions on issues, so that your child can learn to become familiar with a variety of viewpoints. Or, to keep expenses down, use the variety of magazines and newspapers in the public library.

3. If you feel that freedom to learn is being interfered with or that books are being unfairly censored or that teachers', students', and the community's rights are being curtailed in your child's school, let the principal, the Board of Education, and others know where you stand.

4. Take an active part in PTA meetings, particularly when issues arise concerning the curriculum. And be as much (or more) concerned about the type of education your child is receiving today in the social studies as about whether or not "the courses are required to get him or her into college."

5. Work to see that all new social studies teachers employed to teach in your school are well qualified in the area of social studies. Unless the condition of your school system's finances is so critical as to make it inadvisable to do so, urge that social studies teachers be assigned to a full teaching load rather than a double-assignment involving non-social studies preparations. Let social studies teachers teach social studies, and football coaches teach football. Some talented individuals have the interest and ability to do both successfully, for others the situation can lead to poor teaching—or a losing football team.

6. Don't let significant holidays pass by unnoticed. There must be more to July 4th than firecrackers and more to Thanksgiving

than turkey. Take time to discuss with your child the meaning of such holidays and their relationships to our lives today.

7. Go with your child to political, economic, and social events from which he or she can learn: for example, a session of a local political group, a taxpayers' meeting called to discuss a county budget, a public hearing concerning the construction of a road near your home, a debate about the need for low-cost housing in the inner city.

8. Have available for reference at home: a well-written and accurate encyclopedia, two dictionaries (one of which should be at the level of your child's understanding), a volume on synonyms and antonyms, an atlas, and an up-to-date almanac. Encyclopedias can be costly, of course, and may not fit your budget; however, the other items are available in inexpensive paperbacks. And, since recordings often capture the moods and attitudes of individuals and groups in a society, keep a record player and records that reflect your child's tastes as well as your own.

9. Keep your eye on television programs (both figuratively and literally). Many of these programs deal effectively with such social studies subjects as life in the cities, rising population, cost of living, environmental pollution, social security for the aged, and international tensions. View such programs together with your child so that you share a common base of information and concern about issues.

10. Demonstrate to your child that you really do believe in the importance of good citizenship by taking actions with him or her against any attempts in your neighborhood to discriminate against people because of race, creed, sex, ethnic origin, or opinion.

11. Finally, let your children know that, despite wars, inflation, corruption, and other conditions that plague our world, you have not lost faith in the ability of human beings to solve their problems. It is difficult for children to have faith in principles that their parents no longer accept. So, if you believe that by intelligence, compassion, and hard work, human beings can create a decent world, let your children know it. *Your* confidence may help *your children* to do it!